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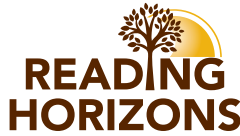
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## **Implementation of Common Core–Based Curriculum in a Fourth-Grade Literacy Classroom: An Exploratory Study**

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### **Abstract**

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were adopted by most states by 2010. Yet, many teachers still lack confidence in their ability to integrate these standards into their classroom instruction and this uncertainty undermines their effectiveness. This article presents findings from a study of a fourth grade literacy curriculum informed by the CCSS. The study mobilized the Vygotskian notion of mediation as it applies in a literacy learning context and addresses the following research questions: (a) What were fourth grade student English language arts achievement levels and beliefs about literacy prior to and following the implementation of a CCSS-based curriculum? (b) What was the collaborating teacher's response to participating in the implementation project? and (c) What roles did mediating tools play within this literacy learning system? Several types of data were collected: unit assessments from the core curriculum; scaled scores from the state standards test; Informal Reading Inventory and interview responses from six focal students; and teacher interview responses. Analysis demonstrated (a) gains by all students, particularly those who struggled, on all assessment measures, (b) increased metacognitive awareness and positive changes in beliefs about reading on the part of focal students, (c) the teacher's growing confidence in and commitment to the new curriculum, and (d) a growing use of mediational tools by students. These findings support the argument that a structured CCSS curriculum, adapted by classroom teachers, can serve as an important tool serving to mediate the space between students and literacy achievement.

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**KEYWORDS:** Common Core State Standards, literacy, mediation, elementary, curriculum

In 2009, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGACBP) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) commissioned a set of national content guidelines now known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS); the standards were published the following year (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010). At present, 42 states and the District of Columbia have adopted these standards. The CCSS were crafted to guide

instruction and were not intended to serve as curriculum (Shanahan, 2015); in fact, the CCSS authors assert that

the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached . . . Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards. (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4)

Nevertheless, many districts have chosen not to embrace this flexibility (Bridges-Rhoads & Van Cleve, 2016). Teachers are often prohibited from exercising their professional judgment and saddled with isolated skills-based purchased curricula (Wall, 2016).

Even in less constraining environments, however, this recommendation—that teachers assume control of how they teach—has proven to be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it offers teachers the opportunity to teach in ways that can be adapted to meet the needs of the students they serve. On the other hand, only 20% of surveyed teachers reported they were very prepared to teach the CCSS (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2013); the great majority (72%) said they needed access to additional curriculum resources aligned to the standards. And, lest it be assumed these difficulties have dissipated, a 2016 study by Ajayi demonstrated that teachers believed Common Core–based curriculum materials and professional development remain inadequate. It appears teachers require more support to effectively teach these standards than they have, to date, received.

Given teachers' lack of confidence in their ability to integrate the CCSS in their instruction, it is not surprising that results from CCSS assessments have been disappointing. Some states have adopted tests developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (2015) or the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (2015), and pass rates on those assessments have ranged from 21% to 60%. New York has implemented its own CCSS-based tests; 31.1% of students in Grades 3–8 scored at the proficient level in English language arts (ELA) in 2013, rising only .2% by 2015 (New York State Education Department, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

Lack of teacher confidence and concomitant low achievement levels have proved challenging for schools and districts. In this article, I describe an ELA curriculum I developed and implemented in collaboration with a fourth-grade teacher. I argue here that such a curriculum, based on the ELA CCSS and supported by in-class professional development, can increase teachers' expertise and confidence in their ability to provide appropriate instruction for their students. An increase in student achievement may follow.

In service of this effort, I collected achievement data for all students and employed an interview protocol to focus on reading beliefs with six focal students who struggled with literacy. The study addressed three research questions:

- What were fourth-grade student ELA achievement levels and beliefs about literacy prior to and following the implementation of a CCSS-based curriculum?
- What was the collaborating teacher's response to participating in this implementation project?

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<sup>1</sup> The 2016 results are available, and 37.6% of third through eighth graders were designated as proficient. However, the New York State Education Department website states that the scores cannot be compared due to changes in the exam and testing environment.

- What roles did mediating tools play within this literacy learning system?

The CCSS have altered educational expectations, and the ELA CCSS curriculum we implemented mediated the space between the students we served and the standards we expected them to grasp.

### Conceptual Framework

The construct of mediation (Vygotsky, 1978) served as the theoretical foundation for teaching and learning in this study (see Figure 1).

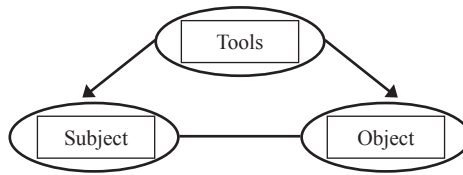


Figure 1: Mediation model

Vygotsky argued that actions requiring higher psychological functions are mediated by historically modified tools. These tools include physical objects such as hammers or preeminently, sign systems that facilitate, among other things, objects such as reading and writing.

### Mediation and Literacy

Literacy researchers have employed Vygotsky's mediational view of teaching and learning. Smagorinsky (2011) refers to classroom settings as contexts that mediate development. The process of learning and applying what has been learned in other contexts (e.g., predicting during a class read-aloud and then employing this strategy during self-selected reading time) is commonly referred to as *internalization*, but Newell, Tallman, and Letcher (2009) prefer the term *appropriation*. Rather than imagining that, for example, children accept a newly learned strategy precisely as taught, the concept of appropriation explains the ways in which they adapt and modify such strategies to meet their own needs. Predicting *what may happen next* is less appropriate for expository text, but the student may predict *what might be learned* from the text instead.

Appropriation fails to occur unless the student participates actively in the classroom community (Smagorinsky, 2011). In addition, appropriation is a matter of degree rather than an all-or-nothing phenomenon (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999), with students falling along a continuum from lack of any appropriation to nearly complete appropriation. At one end of the spectrum, students may reject instruction if they believe it to be too challenging. They may appropriate labels (e.g., "I am cross-checking") without full, or even partial, understanding of the practice that the label describes, or they may understand the practice in the abstract but fail to apply it. Mastery may come after years of practice or not at all; for example, who can be said to "master" writing?

Ultimately, the extent to which instruction is appropriated by learners depends on the level of congruence between their values and prior experience and those of the more powerful members of the literacy community these learners inhabit (Newell et al., 2009). It is important for teachers to regularly assert that meaning-making is the goal of all literacy learning and adapt their literacy instruction to fully engage and activate learners. At times, this effort may take the form of explicit instruction in textual codes with which students may be unfamiliar (Delpit, 1995). At other times, an implicit, inquiry-based model

of instruction may be more effective (Smagorinsky, 2011). In sum, a mediational theory of literacy learning can provide a foundation for teaching within a rich, standards-based framework. The theory applies to the extent that instruction involves experiences with tools, such as reading strategies and peer discussions, and supporting students in appropriating these tools for their own purposes.

In the context in which this study took place, the CCSS ELA curriculum and related modeling and co-teaching provided for a fourth-grade teacher (subject) served as tools for mediating effective instruction (object). In turn, this instruction served to mediate the space between her students (subjects) and literacy achievement (object) (see Figure 2). The project described here reflects the belief that literacy development occurs when (a) the number and variety of tools increase and grow in mediational potential (Cole, 1996) and (b) the subject comes to view the object (literacy) as more complex than originally imagined (Engestrom, 1987). In other words, the curriculum positioned literacy as a rich and expansive process—as described in the CCSS—and offered a variety of tools that facilitated literacy learning.

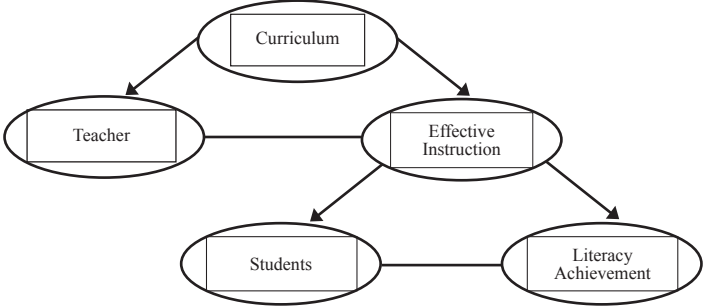


Figure 2: Mediation model for the researched classroom

### Literacy and Common Core Research

I review here a range of pieces that propose recommendations for teaching to the CCSS. Pieces published before data collection began in 2013 informed the instructional design; I include the later articles because they are compatible with that design. All but one of these articles—and all those published before the research described here began—are limited to recommendations for CCSS-based instruction. I also review the one available research study designed to assess CCSS implementation.

**Instructional recommendations.** Most of the articles related to the ELA CCSS focus on the ways teachers can effectively implement these standards in the classroom. Many authors advocate a sociocultural/Vygotskian approach to teaching the standards. Woodard and Kline (2016) promoted writing for specific purposes with attention to a range of convention systems. Graham, Harris, and Santangelo (2015) viewed a positive and supportive educational context as a key feature in light of concerns about the psychosocial impact of the intense instruction often associated with the CCSS (Saeki, Pendergast, Segool, & van der Embse, 2015); this may be particularly true for students with gifted and talented designations (Van Tassel-Baska, 2015), English learners (Wolf, Wang, Blood, & Huang, 2014), and students with special needs (Marsh, 2015). Mo, Kopke, Hawkins, Troia, and Olinghouse (2014) advocated for a context that focuses as much on the process of learning as it does on specific content. Such an environment engages students in dialogue supported by more nuanced instructional questioning (Giouroukakis & Cohan, 2014). James and

Bullock (2015), Senn, McMurtrie, and Coleman (2013), and Smith (2014) recommended integration of literacy standards and content area learning.

It is also important to guide students' relationship with text in new ways. For example, texts may be used to promote students' critical literacy, leading to writing of evidence-based argument that serves as the basis for community advocacy projects (Grindon, 2014). Kern (2014) argued that children should choose their own texts; when texts are chosen for use with the whole class, Fisher and Frey (2014) recommended that teachers assess text complexity and plan ways in which they can make those texts more accessible for students.

Although media portrayal of CCSS-based assessments has focused on high-stakes summative measures, authors have suggested that formative assessments are, if anything, more important (McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012). Greenstein (2013) recommended an assessment/instruction sequence including pre-assessment, instruction with embedded assessment, necessary instructional modifications, interim assessments used to designate those students requiring additional help, and appropriate interventions, as needed. Graham, Hebert, and Harris (2015) suggested that teaching students to self-assess their work is also important.

**Research on CCSS implementation.** In their 2015 study, Barrett-Tatum and Dooley traced implementation of CCSS-based ELA lessons in two primary-grade classrooms addressing the following research questions:

- How are teachers implementing ELA CCSS into their literacy instruction?
- What learning opportunities are created in this enacted curriculum?

Data collected included teacher interviews and classroom observations. Both classrooms employed modified reading workshop and writing workshop blocks. The authors found that, despite commonalities between classrooms—related to, for example, student populations, district requirements, and instructional routines—learning opportunities differed. Although both teachers attended closely to the standards, the first-grade teacher's scripts were flexible and responsive to student needs and interests. In the second-grade classroom, instruction was fully teacher-centered and classroom discourse followed a traditional initiation-response-evaluation interaction pattern. Because no assessment data were collected as part of this study, ways in which these classroom environments may have influenced student achievement are unknown. In closing their article, Barrett-Tatum and Dooley (2015) hinted at the need for additional research in this area by stating that "researchers and educators alike need to trouble the impact of a standards-based reform model on all students' success" (p. 280).

What is missing from this research literature, however, are studies that examine comprehensive ELA CCSS-based curriculum implementations including achievement measures. The study described here was conducted in an effort to fill that gap by reflecting common exploratory research practice that (a) generates additional hypotheses, (b) surfaces and highlights a variety of ideas about instructional decision making and curriculum implementation related to an under-researched area, and (c) provides a model for concatenated research (that is, other small-scale replications with differing populations) and, eventually, larger scale confirmatory research (Goeman & Solari, 2011; Stebbins, 2001).

## Method

The site of this study was Campbell Elementary School (school and participant names are pseudonyms), located in a rural community 20 miles outside of a large city in the southwestern United States. Of the 534 students attending the K–8 school, 3% were African American, 1% American Indian, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 44% Hispanic, and 50% White; 41% of the population qualified for free or reduced-price lunch when the study commenced in fall of 2013. Traditionally, students at the school had done well on standardized tests, but over the past few years, scores had begun to decline. With more challenging CCSS testing on the horizon, the superintendent worried that Campbell students would not succeed, and teachers also expressed the pressure and uncertainty they felt moving forward. As a result, this site, and the participants involved, was appropriate for the study I conducted.

## Participants

One student with an individualized education program (IEP) received most of her literacy instruction in the resource room and was not included in the research. The remaining fourth graders ( $n = 51$ ) participated in a range of ways:

- All students were taught using the new CCSS curriculum and assessed with unit tests and the state standards test. Data from the previous spring suggested that 23% of these students were reading well above grade level on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA; Beaver, 2011), 46% at or just above grade level, and 31% below grade level.
- In addition to the assessments noted above, I gave those students reading below grade level according to the DRA ( $n = 16$ ) an adapted version of the Fountas and Pinnell (2010) Benchmark Assessment. These students were eligible for extra support from the reading specialist (see Jaeger, 2016). In September, we sent home student assent and parent permission documents for each of these students.
- Few assents/permissions were returned ( $n = 6$ ), but the students were diverse. Four were White and two were Latino, three were reading a year or more below grade level on the DRA and three were reading slightly below level, and there was an equal number of boys and girls. These focal students were interviewed as part of the study.

Working with a range of participants allowed us to consider the ways in which their learning was mediated in similar and distinct ways.

Katrina, one of the fourth-grade teachers, taught literacy to both classes while her colleague Elspeth provided instruction in math. Katrina responded with interest to my proposal to develop and co-teach a CCSS-based reading curriculum. She had taught for 28 years when the study began, 27 of them at this school. When I first met Katrina, she organized her reading instruction around a basal reader and demonstrated a skills-based orientation to literacy instruction (Dahl & Freppon, 1995), similar to her colleagues at Campbell. As she stated in her initial interview:

I would do a typical introduction and have the kids have some kind of prior knowledge ... and then do some kind of anticipatory set. But then basically introducing vocabulary, listening to the story on tape, then reading it aloud to me, discuss it, do worksheets together, and then typically culminate with a test. And it would take about a week.



Katrina believed this type of instruction worked relatively well for her average and above-average readers, but she noticed that the vulnerable readers<sup>2</sup> in her classes were often disengaged, did poorly on unit assessments, and lacked confidence. She feared that, with implementation of the more challenging CCSS, this curriculum would no longer effectively serve any of her students; new mediating tools were required. When presented with a well-structured curriculum and regular in-class support in the form of demonstration lessons and co-teaching, she was ready for a change. Katrina's responsibilities in the study were to observe my demonstration lessons with the first group of students she saw each day, teach the lesson to the other group, and continue to implement the curriculum on the days I was not present at the site. She also administered the unit assessments and collected student work such as drawings and written reflections.

### **Researcher Positionality and Supports for Validity**

My roles in this context were many and varied, including curriculum developer, professional development provider, and co-teacher, as well as researcher; this added complexity to my positionality. I spent 25 years as a classroom teacher and reading specialist prior to becoming a researcher, so the trials and tribulations of classroom teaching were always on my mind. It is possible that my familiarity with public school routines influenced the way I interacted with participants; for example, I may have been less than forthright with Katrina than a more neutral researcher would have been because I was cognizant of the realities with which she contended. On the other hand, I brought a certain sensitivity to the site born of my experience, and that sensitivity served as a tool of sorts in my efforts to build rapport. Supports for validity included intensive, long-term involvement at the site, respondent validation via student and teacher interviews, triangulation of data sources, and statistical tests of significance (Maxwell, 2013).

### **Description of Curriculum Implementation**

The object of the curriculum implementation was to increase literacy achievement. It was designed to address the fourth-grade CCSS for reading literature and information text and foundational skills. Although not specified as CCSS content, units on reading strategies were also included in an effort to provide students with tools that would mediate their understanding by engaging them in metacognitive thinking about their reading processes (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; Barrett-Tatum & Dooley, 2015).

Studies discussed in the review of literature supported the curriculum development that served as the basis of this study. The instructional environment was positive (Graham, Harris, et al., 2015), process focused (Mo et al., 2014), and dialogic/critical in approach (Giouroukakis & Cohan, 2014; Grindon, 2014). Reading strategies were a key part of the instructional design (Barrett-Tatum & Dooley, 2015). Literacy and science instruction were integrated when possible (Senn et al., 2013). We took a systematic approach to student assessment (Greenstein, 2013), employing a variety of measures. Instruction was differentiated based on that assessment (McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012), with students needing more support participating in small-group learning experiences (Marsh, 2015; Wolf et al., 2014).

Because student participants spanned the range of achievement levels, literature about teaching and learning and related research-based practices—especially as they apply to vulnerable readers—served as the foundation for the curriculum. These mediational tools included the following:

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term vulnerable (Jaeger, 2015) to refer to readers who are particularly sensitive to disruptions in their literacy ecology: uninteresting texts, inauthentic tasks, stressed teachers, and potentially oppressive social structures related to class, race, gender, and so on.



- A gradual-release-of-responsibility instructional design (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983): During activities early in the unit the teacher was responsible for most of the “work”; students assumed more responsibility as the unit progressed, culminating with an independent writing assignment and the unit assessment.
- Reading of authentic texts (McEneaney, Lose, & Schwartz, 2006): The curriculum employed appropriately leveled high-quality picture books and other whole texts. Most texts were at students’ instructional or independent levels, but those read during shared reading were more challenging, as recommended by the CCSS (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Many of the reading materials were selected by students to increase engagement (Kern, 2014).
- Student-to-student as well as student-to-teacher interaction (Beecher, 2010/2011): Students regularly talked with partners prior to sharing out to the whole group and participated in small-group discussions structured by questions they had composed themselves. These activities reflected the language CCSS.
- Systematic assessment (Greenstein, 2013): This included both formative (McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012) and student self-assessment (Graham, Hebert, & Harris, 2015). These assessments tended to focus on one anchor standard but often integrated several specific standards, as frequently recommended in CCSS materials (Common Core, 2012).

ELA CCSS documents do not specify the order in which to address the standards, but one review of the CCSS conducted after my data collection was complete (Pandya & Aukerman, 2014) recommended instruction reflecting Luke and Freebody’s (1999) comprehensive four resources model of literacy practice. This model includes the following roles: code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text analyst. These roles are, in fact, groups of related literacy tools. Working within and across these roles, readers learn to decode text (including meaning-based strategies such as use of context clues), construct meanings from a combination of text and prior knowledge/experience, learn ways to employ texts for the reader’s purposes, and view texts as ideological rather than neutral. Employing this structure emphasized the process-focused (Mo et al., 2014) and critical/dialogical (Giouroukakis & Cohan, 2014; Grindon, 2014) character of CCSS work. While these four aspects appeared to a greater or lesser degree in all units, we began with units that focused on code-breaking before moving on to other roles (see Appendix A for a complete list of units).

### **Exemplar Unit**

I describe the character analysis unit in some detail. It addressed CCSS Standard RL.4.3: “Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character’s thoughts, words, or actions).” The unit began with an interactive read-aloud (Jordan, 2015) of *Prairie Fire* (Reynolds, 1999). The main character of the story is a young boy who, despite his fear, helps his family save their farm buildings from a fast-moving fire. Students were asked to attend to what the boy was like as a person and how his character evolved over the course of the story. The postreading discussion, however, was free-flowing, with students talking about their experiences in the country, things they have learned from their parents, and so on. Although the CCSS downplays the power of incorporating prior knowledge into discussion of text, this tool has a firm foundation in the literature (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Pearson, 2013)

The following day, this same book was used to conduct a brief, focused mini-

lesson on character traits; mini-lessons are the primary instructional tool in the reading workshop model (Meyer, 2010). The teacher emphasized the boy's bravery and returned to the text to give specific examples of this character trait, reflecting the CCSS emphasis on close reading and evidence-building. At this point, students read a book of their own choosing, marking places in the text where they applied the day's mini-lesson with post-its (yet another tool); this activity aided the process of appropriation. One child, for example, noted a character's kindness, intervening when her friend was being bullied. Another believed the main character in her book to be responsible, because he helped his mother without being asked. As students read, the teacher circulated among them, discussing with the students the traits and evidence they discovered. At the end of reading time, students evaluated their work by sharing their ideas with partners and then with the full group.

Over the next day or two, students participated in shared reading (Stahl, 2012) with a text that highlighted the unit topic and stretched their reading abilities. During the character unit, students read "Addie in Charge." The teacher used a supported reading technique to ensure that students could access the text; as she read aloud, students tracked the text and chorally chimed in with a word when she paused in her reading. As they read, the class engaged in informal conversation about Addie's assertiveness and other qualities. Later, they revisited a segment of the text to participate in a close reading activity (Fisher & Frey, 2012): They selected words and sentences that seemed important to them and noted connections across sentences and paragraphs. Challenging but accessible text, informal conversation, and close reading served as mediational tools in this reading approach.

The next few days were devoted to guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012); this approach included its own collection of tools. Students were divided in groups by DRA-determined reading level. They met with the teacher, who introduced the story they would read. Then they read the text independently and completed an assignment; in the character unit, this assignment consisted of composing a paragraph about the main character's traits. Later they reconvened for a collaborative retelling of the story and a discussion of characters.

Finally, the students completed an end-of-unit assessment: a tool designed to measure their understanding of unit content. For the character unit, the teacher read aloud *Mr. Lincoln's Way* (Polacco, 2001). Each student selected one of the two main characters—an angry young boy named Eugene or his patient principal, Mr. Lincoln. As they listened to the story, students circled relevant character traits on a list. They then transferred these traits to a planning sheet, where they also added specific evidence from the text to support those traits. Finally, they composed paragraphs fleshing out the notes they had taken, linking unit content to a standard for writing, 4.9A: "Apply Grade 4 reading standards to [writing about] literature (e.g., RL4.3)."

## Data Collection

Table 1 shows the types of data that were collected between August 2013 and May 2014.

Research questions were addressed as follows. Regarding research question one (What were fourth-grade student ELA achievement levels and beliefs about literacy prior to and following the implementation of a CCSS-based curriculum?), achievement was defined in these ways:

- Percentage of students demonstrating mastery on curriculum-based unit assessments: This measure reflected what students had been directly taught in the lessons we provided and approximated assignments given during the unit itself.

Table 1  
Data Collected 2013–2014

Instrument	Administered to ... and by ...	Instrument Description	Administra- tion Dates	Purpose for Admin- istration
Unit assess- ments	Given to all students (n = 51) by teacher	These researcher-developed assessments resembled CCSS-based classroom assignments rather than “tests”; average completion time was about 45 minutes.	At the completion of each unit	Measured un- derstanding of unit content
State stan- dards test (AIMS)	Given to all students in third grade in April 2013 and again in fourth grade (April 2014) by teacher; 12 students present in August of fourth grade (2013) had attended other schools in third grade, so their data were not included (n = 39).	AIMS is a criterion-refer- enced test designed to measure the state standards that preceded the CCSS; for the most part, it employs a traditional multiple-choice design.	April 2013 (third grade), April 2014 (fourth grade)	Served as a dis- tal measure of overall reading achievement
Adapted Fountas & Pinnell (2010) Benchmark Assessment	Texts from the published version of this Informal Reading Inventory were used, but administration procedures were streamlined; given by researcher.	The assessment was given to all students reading below level according to the DRA given in May 2013 (n = 16); all students assessed on the Fountas & Pinnell in the fall were also present in winter and spring.	September 2013, February and May 2014	Proximally measured overall reading achievement for vulnerable readers; information texts were used to reflect the CCSS’s emphasis on this genre
Student interviews	Researcher inter- viewed vulnerable reader focal stu- dents (n = 6): three boys and three girls, four Whites and two Latina/os, three near grade level in reading and three well below	Interview questions were open-ended and addressed literacy beliefs (see Appen- dix B, Part 1 for interview protocol).	September 2013, February and May 2014	Surfaced vulnerable readers’ beliefs about and experiences with literacy and detected changes that were, poten- tially, linked to the CCSS curriculum
Teacher interviews	Researcher inter- viewed Katrina, the fourth-grade literacy teacher	Interview questions were open-ended and explored teacher beliefs (see Appen- dix B, Part 2 for interview protocol).	October and December 2013, February and May 2014	Surfaced teach- er beliefs about (a) teaching and learning, (b) the focal students, and (c) the CCSS imple- mentation

- Scaled score growth on the state standards test: Although this test did not yet reflect the CCSS, it served as the distal measure of reading growth.
- Grade-level growth on a modified version of the Fountas and Pinnell (2010) Benchmark Assessment. Although the provided texts were used, the retell process was simplified and higher level thinking questions (e.g., predicting, evaluating) were added. It was important to employ a measure like this that closely resembled the act of independent reading. Because the Fountas and Pinnell was time-consuming to administer, we reserved this assessment for below-level readers only.
- Evidence from focal student interviews of their reaction to instruction (see Appendix B, Part 1). These questions measured facile use of comprehension strategies and self-description of reading knowledge for the focal students.

To address research question two (What was the collaborating teacher's response to participating in this implementation project?), the teacher's reaction to involvement was measured by quarterly interviews (see Appendix B, Part 2). Regarding research question three (What roles did mediating tools play within this literacy learning system?), the role of tools was assessed through analysis of curriculum unit plans as well as student and teacher interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis varied by instrument. I rated student scores for the unit assessments as high (90% accuracy or higher), passing (70%–89%), or not passing (below 70%). Participants' AIMS scores for both third grade (2013) and fourth grade (2014) were available for 39 students, so a t-test was used to assess statistical significance on this measure. Due to the relatively small sample ( $n = 16$ ), Fountas and Pinnell (2010) scores were analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. Qualitative data from student interviews were analyzed by specific question (e.g., How do you choose something to read?). For teacher interview data, I employed data-driven coding (Gibbs, 2007). I read the transcripts, looking for patterns in the data: reading, rereading, and recoding as necessary to reach saturation. Finally, in working with interview transcripts and curriculum documents, I employed the theoretical construct of mediating tool for concept-driven coding (Gibbs, 2007); that is, I looked through all documents for instances of tool use and the level of sophistication of those tools. In sum, I employed assessment results, data-driven, and concept-driven coding to answer the research questions.

### **Findings**

Findings from a range of collected data follow. I begin with achievement data from unit assessments, the state standards test, the Fountas and Pinnell (2010) inventory, and student reflections on learning. Then I consider development in teacher's confidence/commitment. Finally, I examine tool use.

#### **Achievement: Assessments and Student Beliefs**

All achievement-related measures—unit assessments, AIMS, the Fountas and Pinnell (2010), and responsiveness to instruction among the focal students—offered evidence for the success of the implementation. Findings for vulnerable readers were as strong as or stronger than that of their higher achieving peers.

**Unit assessments.** Pass rates for CCSS-based unit assessments averaged 90%.

Although students reading at a sixth-grade level or above on the previous spring's DRA had higher rates than others (98%), results for those reading below grade level (88%) were nearly identical to that of students reading at the a fourth- or fifth-grade level (89%). Unit assessment pass rates tended to increase over the course of the school year.

**AIMS.** Of the 51 students participating in the study, 92% scored meets or exceeds expectations on AIMS in 2014 and no scores fell far below expectations. Based on data regarding students for whom we had scores from the previous year ( $n = 39$ ), the mean scaled score point gain between third and fourth grade was 29 ( $p = 0.01$ ). Students reading below grade level at the end of third grade gained an average of 49 points ( $p = 0.01$ ). This growth is remarkable given that the new curriculum addressed the CCSS while the AIMS test was developed to measure the previous state standards—a finding that speaks to students' ability to transfer their standards-based knowledge to other literacy assessments even when the specific standards measured differ. In comparison, growth in reading for those students who were in fifth or sixth grade in 2013–2014 (and therefore did not receive instruction using this type of curriculum) was not statistically significant, nor was growth in mathematics for the fourth graders who were involved in the study. Unfortunately, stronger readers failed to achieve hoped-for gains on AIMS. The scores of those students reading well above grade level in fall 2013 and for whom we had spring 2014 data ( $n = 6$ ) increased, on average, by only six scaled score points; in fact, the scores of two students dropped by 13 and 20 points, respectively. It appeared that adjustments in the instructional protocol would be necessary to better support these strong readers.

**Fountas and Pinnell assessment.** Improvement on the Fountas and Pinnell (2010) Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) was substantial. The average gain among the 16 students who were assessed with this instrument (those reading below grade level in the fall) was 2.3 years over the course of a 9-month school year ( $p = 0.01$ ). There may, in fact, have been a ceiling effect with this calculation because, although five students successfully read the Grade 7 passage, I chose not to ask them to read beyond it because they were clearly more than able to negotiate text heading into fifth grade.

**Focal student interview responses.** The six focal students were interviewed at three points during the school year. As noted, the group was diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, and reading level. I derived overall findings from transcripts from each student, but, to add depth and continuity to the interview responses presented here, I provide quotes from only two whose comments represent the range of those made by the group as a whole: Miguel, a Latino male reading well below grade level in fall 2013, and Isabel, a White female reading just below grade level at that time. All focal students reacted positively to the new curriculum and demonstrated responsiveness to the instruction they received. Five of the six students said they felt reading was easier in May than in September; as Miguel put it, “You showed me more stuff to make it easier.”

When asked to name something they had learned, focal students delineated the specific impact of the CCSS-based instruction. Four students employed new strategies before they began reading. Isabel's initial prereading strategy was to get a glass of water! By February she was scanning the text for words that might cause her trouble, and in May she added reading the blurb as a helpful approach.

By spring, five focal students had learned additional tools for understanding challenging vocabulary, grasped the need to vary rate while reading, and adopted new strategies for understanding and remembering what they read. In October, Miguel looked outside the text to deal with words he did not understand—asking for help or using a

dictionary—but by February he was more likely to read on or reread. He initially connected reading rate to mode (silent or oral) or to his feelings: “When I read silent, I read a little bit faster. I slow down when I get nervous.” By May, he adjusted his rate based on text difficulty: “When it’s a hard sentence, I take my time. When it’s easy, I go fast.” When asked about what she did when finished reading to remember what she had read, Isabel reported that her mom asked her questions and, when her mom was unavailable, she asked herself similar questions. Isabel nominated “the parts that say something has happened” as the most important information to remember. Four focal students increased their ability to monitor comprehension. Both Miguel and Isabel named rereading as the best strategy for dealing with confusion, and to this Miguel added asking someone who knows a lot about the topic.

Focal students also exhibited change in their understanding of what it meant to be an effective reader. In general, this change involved a diminishing focus on accuracy and an increasing focus on meaning-making, beliefs supported by CCSS RF4.4: “Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support understanding.” In October and February, Miguel was uncertain about whether reading every word correctly is necessary, but in May he responded, “No, because you might figure out what that word is when you read ahead of it,” a more efficient approach. He also viewed a strong reader as one who reads independently (“My mom helps me a little bit, but not all the time”) and who reads more challenging books. From early on, Miguel understood that a good oral reader like his mom “does excitement and all that, and I have heard her read a lot and a lot.” By May, he said reading clearly was also important. Focal students also recognized that good readers sometimes struggled. Isabel demonstrated a growing understanding that even strong readers encounter trouble as they read, and she became more specific and meaning-oriented in describing their strategies for dealing with difficulty. At first, she believed “they just try their best.” By February, she said they used sounding out as a support. In May, however, she viewed herself as one of those effective readers, commenting that they behave “like I do sometimes. . . . I reread the sentence and fix what I messed up.”

By May, each focal student had refined her or his process for selecting books, reflecting an awareness that reading materials may be appropriate for a range of reasons. Early on, Isabel simply looked at the cover, but in May she said, “I read the cover, and I look through the book, and I read the first page.” Miguel replied that he looked for “not hard books and not easy books.” Although the CCSS clearly support increasing text complexity in instructional situations, the ability to select appropriate books for independent reading is also important.

In sum, solid achievement data supported our general approach to instruction. Unit assessments demonstrated growth for all students, which indicates that the great majority of students were learning the curriculum based on the CCSS. AIMS offered a more global picture of improvement. Vulnerable readers exhibited strong progress on the Fountas and Pinnell (2010) as well as AIMS, suggesting that we were meeting their needs as well or better than those of average and stronger readers. Focal students offered evidence that they had gained greater expertise in strategy/tool use as well as constructing meaning from and discussing whole texts, major areas of focus in the curriculum. Changes in their beliefs about the activity of reading and about what it means to be a successful reader demonstrated their growing awareness of the complexity of the reading process (Engestrom, 1987).



## Teacher Growth and Confidence

Katrina's experiences with and beliefs about the implementation evolved over the course of the school year. Initially, she did her best to implement the lesson tools as planned but found this to be tiring work. She felt "like a student teacher again," and she struggled with feeling far behind in the lessons she hoped to retain from her previous teaching. But then she noticed differences:

I watch the kids . . . being more engaged. With my struggling readers, I think they can be good thinkers. They have had difficulties with school before and it's nice to see how they . . . are not giving up so easily because they have these specific strategies.

By December, Katrina was feeling more confident in the efficacy of the CCSS implementation and less reliant on old ways of teaching. In addition to the benefits for vulnerable readers, she referenced changes in her stronger readers who reported that they were enjoying reading more. Students were also beginning to transfer the tools they had mastered in lessons to other contexts, an example of appropriation. Katrina quoted one student who referred to a science lesson during the unit on character analysis in which they had contrasted feelings (fleeting) with traits (more stable): "Oh, that reminds me of weather and climate and how the weather changes all the time. Climate can change, but it takes a lot to change it." I also noticed Katrina referring to previous CCSS units as she taught new ones, as if the curriculum was all one big learning process rather than units in isolation, another form of appropriation. Students began to do the same (e.g., "We can read ahead to know the word.").

In February, Katrina talked about our work together. She felt she could ask about anything that confused her or tell me if she wanted to go in a different direction. For example, I developed a unit on following directions after she and her fourth-grade colleagues noted this to be a problem. When we spoke in May, Katrina reflected on the progress her vulnerable readers had made: "They really believe they are better readers, and I think that they are." Clearly, Katrina felt excited about and supported by learning new instructional tools.

I shared her enthusiasm. Her students participated actively in the lessons we taught and made headway toward mastering the ELA CCSS. In the end, my concerns were related less to what we had done than to what remained to do. There was room for further differentiation (McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012): more support for students who struggled and more challenge for students who grasped what we were teaching quickly and easily. A more regular system for collecting formative data would have supported this differentiation. To avoid overwhelm, the curriculum I wrote had addressed the reading standards, but not the writing standards. We agreed to work further in this area the following year. And the question of how this project might be expanded to other grade levels loomed large.

## The Role of Mediating Tools

The mediated activity of ELA learning took place within the context of Katrina's classroom. Her students, as active learners, were the subjects of this activity. The object was improved literacy achievement, and a range of tools supported movement toward that object.

**CCSS curriculum in a four resources model frame.** The most obvious of these tools was CCSS-based curriculum organized per Luke and Freebody's (1999) four resource



model. This curriculum structured the learning that occurred and offered opportunities for a range of literacy experiences from interactive read-alouds to reading workshop, shared reading, and guided reading. Other tools played a role as well. The unit assessments measured progress toward the object and alerted us when reteaching was necessary. The Fountas and Pinnell (2010) assessment, given at mid-year as well as in fall and spring, assured us that Katrina's vulnerable readers were progressing as hoped. Another tool was the student interviews. Although time did not permit interviewing all students, for those participating this practice surfaced a clearer sense of their own growth. Finally, both formal and informal interactions with Katrina facilitated our shared work. These interactions ranged from quick chats while lessons were under way to emails for planning upcoming lessons to quarterly interviews in which we discussed how things were going and what we noticed about focal students.

**Number, variety, and mediational potential of tools.** Over the course of the study, there was an increase in the number and variety of tools employed by the students as well as the mediational potential of those tools (Cole, 1996). Primary among these was the concept of metacognition and the reading strategies related to it. Although the CCSS do not call for strategy instruction per se, this instruction was an important foundation for the sophisticated standards to come. The basal curriculum had introduced some of the same strategies (e.g., predicting), but lessons on a given strategy were interspersed randomly throughout the year, undermining the potential for deep understanding. Vulnerable readers exhibited no systematic approach to preparing for and dealing with text difficulty, likely a result of haphazard instruction. This problem was largely overcome with the advent of the new curriculum, which included units that focused on a given strategy for a substantive period of time. In addition, students learned to select from among a range of strategies and coordinate the ways in which they employed them before, during, and after reading. The mediational potential of strategy tools increased as students' ability to apply them independently grew. As noted in the discussion of focal student interviews, this ability heightened students' awareness of the complexity of the reading process, all the while increasing their confidence for tackling that complexity (Engestrom, 1987).

Students also came to use tools that were more directly connected to the CCSS themselves. I list three examples here: They geared the accuracy and fluency of their reading to meaning-making rather than speed. An understanding of character traits and development allowed them to engage more deeply with the novels they read. And knowledge of Internet tools facilitated the research they conducted.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that a rich and engaging curriculum, based on the ELA CCSS and supported by in-class professional development, can increase teacher expertise and confidence and support student achievement. In service of this argument, this article has provided answers to the proposed research questions related to reading achievement/beliefs, teacher confidence, and tool use.

## **Increased Reading Achievement and Richer Reader Beliefs**

When an ELA CCSS-based curriculum was implemented in a fourth-grade classroom, student achievement levels were strong on the proximal (unit) assessments. Scores improved on the state standards test and, for vulnerable readers, the Fountas and Pinnell (2010) inventory. Students—vulnerable readers in particular—participated actively in the lessons and verbalized the positive experiences they had. And the teacher, although challenged initially, enjoyed teaching the curriculum and intended to maintain and expand

implementation in ensuing years. An analysis of focal student interview responses added support for our belief that students not only were better readers but also were able, when given the opportunity, to reflect on the growth they had made. In addition, when asked what changes they would like to see in classroom activities, several focal students requested more time to read independently.

### **Teacher Confidence and Researcher Awareness**

Over time, Katrina became more confident in her ability to help students construct meaning from text and to understand and apply sophisticated standards; she also demonstrated an increasing commitment to the changes we had made. From the discussions we had, I came to better understand the combination of tenacity and flexibility necessary to facilitate the implementation of a new curriculum in a new context, even with a willing and able teacher partner and interested students. In the end, we believed, along with Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom (1993), that “the possibilities for following certain paths of action [had been] shaped by the mediational means employed” (p. 342) and that those means had contributed to positive outcomes.

### **Greater Variety and Sophistication in Tool Use**

The CCSS-based curriculum was the primary tool in this study. It facilitated both teacher planning and student success. Most units followed the same structure—read-aloud, reading workshop, shared reading, and guided reading—but within that structure there was a greater variety of activities than was the case in the basal curriculum, and those activities were intensely focused on the standard(s) driving each unit. Rather than focusing on comprehension of a single story, as the basal unit tests did, the CCSS unit assessments asked students to apply their knowledge of what had been taught to a range of texts. Comprehensive and in-depth strategy instruction supported students’ understanding of the CCSS. In terms of the research project per se, the student and teacher interviews served as important tools in unlocking the experiences of key classroom players.

The findings from this study are, of course, interrelated. The mediational tools such as curriculum and assessments supported Katrina’s professional development and raised her levels of proficiency, confidence, and commitment. These changes, in turn, supported progress in student achievement and beliefs about literacy.

### **Limitations**

This study has five major limitations. The first relates to the student (and, potentially, the teacher) interviews. Given my obvious enthusiasm for the project, it is possible that interviewees painted a rosy picture of their engagement in an effort to please me and their actual experiences were less positive than they appeared. The fact that we were unable to teach the text analyst aspect of the curriculum before the year ended was a second limitation. In future iterations, it will be important to both teach and assess this important literacy role, particularly considering the CCSS’s greater emphasis on close reading and evidence gathering. A third issue was the absence of a CCSS-based distal assessment. I used the AIMS as a general transfer measure, but this assessment was based on the state standards that preceded the CCSS; use of a CCSS-based assessment would likely alter the achievement findings. The fourth limitation relates to the potential for a more teacher-driven research protocol, often referred to as action research (Craig, 2009; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). The motivating force for this study was my own interest and commitment. Had it originally emerged from Katrina’s unease with her own teaching, her colleagues might have been more likely to turn to her for support, and therefore difficulties

with transfer to other classrooms would have been mitigated to some degree. Finally, and of greatest significance, the study occurred in one grade level in one context. Were it to have taken place in first grade or sixth grade, with a more diverse population, the outcomes might have been quite different. Because of these limitations, this study should be considered exploratory.

### **Implications**

Even given these limitations, there are implications within this work for practice and future research. Implications for practice include lessons learned about ELA instruction in an era of Common Core. Implications for future research involve conducting concatenated exploratory studies with differing populations and, eventually, confirmatory experimental or quasiexperimental designs. As is common among exploratory studies, the work generated new questions and hypotheses as well as provided answers.

### **Instructional Practice**

There are four key instructional implications of this study. First, when crafted with attention to what is known about teaching and learning (e.g., the benefits of using a gradual-release-of-responsibility model of instruction), curriculum units that systematically address the CCSS mediated between readers and increased achievement. This is true for vulnerable readers as well as their more successful peers. Additional curriculum development beyond a single grade level will be necessary to facilitate schoolwide adoption.

A second implication is that an instructional protocol such as the one employed here needs to be adjusted as needed to suit a given situation. Rather than arranging the units per the four resources model, they could, for example, be structured differently to more fully integrate the reading of narrative and expository text.

Third, because stronger readers in this study failed to demonstrate the gains of mid-level and vulnerable readers, adjustments in the instructional protocol are necessary to better support these more advanced readers. One possibility is to give an optional preassessment prior to each unit. Students who were successful on the preassessment would then be allowed to complete an independent or collaborative project. For example, they might meet in literature circle groups to discuss texts of their own choosing (Barone & Barone, 2016; Cameron, Murray, Hull, & Cameron, 2012). These discussions could include some aspect of the unit under way in the classroom, such as predicting with narrative text or constructing their own text features for an information text.

Finally, in upcoming iterations of this work, either a 75-minute instructional block or integration of literacy curriculum across content areas seems necessary for students to experience the full breadth and depth of the curriculum. As currently organized, reading and writing lessons were almost entirely separated and the only cross-curricular link occurred when the text user part of the curriculum was taught in the context of a science research project.

### **Future Research**

The research reported here was an initial exploratory study. As such, it offers only hints about what this curriculum, or something like it, might offer. Additional exploratory studies are necessary to investigate how this implementation would play out if alterations such as an extended literacy block were included. More importantly, such studies might examine a similar protocol employed in different contexts. For example, very few Campbell School fourth graders were English learners. English learners might

benefit from a more explicit emphasis on English language development than is found in the current iteration of the curriculum. Younger children would likely require assignments involving less writing and more multimodal and hands-on work. Older students would be likely to find the overall structure repetitive, and a fuller integration of standards would reflect the growing complexity of their thinking.

Eventually, one or more studies designed to test rather than generate hypotheses—so-called confirmatory studies—would prove useful. A series of exploratory studies would serve to eliminate a range of potentially promising but ultimately fruitless variables, solidifying our knowledge of what crucial aspects of curriculum and instruction underlie CCSS-based learning. Then a larger scale design-based research project (Reinking & Bradley, 2007) could track outcomes in a school that embraces ongoing change. Further down the line, a randomized control trial (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) could compare different approaches to Common Core-based teaching, ideally across a range of grade levels, allowing for the opportunity to confirm as well as explore.

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Appendix A: Instructional Units Preliminaries

Name of Unit	Common Core State Standard
Sustained Silent Reading (SSR): Selecting appropriate books, talking about texts, keeping a record, metacognitive thinking/reading strategies	SL1 & 3
Following directions	None
Code Breaker	
Word reading strategies	F3 & 4; L4
Fluency and rate variation (scan for facts, skim for main idea, basic rate, slow for dealing with difficulty)	F4
Meaning Maker	
Comprehension strategies: Know/predict/wonder/revise, visualize, make connections	R10
Inferring	R1, R10
Comprehension monitoring/fix-ups	R10
Story structure and retelling	R2N
Understanding character traits, relationships, and change over time	R3N
Writing (and reading) short stories	W3 & 5; L1–6
Literature circles with short stories and comparative literature study	R9N and SL1
Text User	
Using prior knowledge and questioning the text	R10
Dealing with difficult vocabulary	R4 and L4–6
Determining main ideas and summarizing	R2I & 5I
Text features, both print and digital	R5I & 7I
Conducting research, writing and presenting reports	R9I; W2 & 5–9, SL2–6, L1–6
Text Analyst	
Evaluation	R8
Theme	R2N
Point of view and present/marginalized/silenced voices	R6N
Literature circles with novels and comparative literature study (each student partners with a student reading a different novel)	R1 & 9N; SL1
Reading drama	R5N & 7N

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocols**

### **Part 1: Focal Student Interview Protocol**

1. How do you choose something to read? How do you know if a book is good for you?
2. Do you do anything before you begin to read to make the reading easier? If so, what?
3. When you are reading and come to a word you can't pronounce, what do you do? Do you ever do anything else?
4. When you are reading and come to a word you don't know the meaning of, what do you do? Do you ever do anything else?
5. Do you read at the same speed all the time? If not, why do you slow down? Why do you speed up?
6. When you are reading and you get confused about what is going on in a story or about the information in an article, what do you do? Do you ever do anything else?
7. Do you do anything when you finish reading to help you remember what you've read? If so, what?
8. How do you decide what is important to remember from what you've read?
9. Do you think it's important to read every word correctly? Why or why not?
10. Who is the best reader you know? What does that person do that makes her or him a good reader?
11. Do you think good readers ever have trouble when they read? If so, what do you think they do?

#### **Second interview:**

12. Have you learned anything about reading or writing since the last time we talked? If so, what have you learned?
13. Has reading gotten easier or harder since the last time we talked? If so, how?

### **Part 2: Teacher Interview Protocol**

#### ***Teacher Beliefs*<sup>3</sup>**

1. Describe the way you teach reading.
2. Where did you learn to teach in this way?
3. Has your teaching of reading/writing changed at all over time? If so, how?
4. What do you believe to be going well with your reading/writing instruction?
5. What are the challenges of the work you are doing in reading/writing this year?
6. What do you find difficult to accomplish in your reading/writing instruction?

#### ***About Focal Students***

7. How do you see \_\_\_\_\_ as a reader/writer?
8. Follow-up, as needed:
  - o What are her or his strengths? As a reader? As a writer?

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<sup>3</sup>This protocol is adapted from Richardson (1994).

- o What are her or his challenges? As a reader? As a writer?
- o Please describe a typical reading/writing class with \_\_\_\_\_.
- o What parts of the current curriculum seem well suited for her or him? Ill suited?
- o What parts of the curriculum does she or he seem to enjoy? Not enjoy?
- o What attitudes does she or he seem to have toward reading/writing?
- o How do you think \_\_\_\_\_ sees herself or himself as a reader/writer?

### ***Instructional Change***

9. Describe any changes in your teaching of reading/writing since we last talked.
10. Tell me about the curriculum unit(s) you've taught since we last talked.
11. What do you believe to be going well with your reading/writing instruction currently?
12. What are the difficulties of the work you are doing in reading/writing currently?
13. What support do you need to continue to move forward with your practice?
14. Have you noticed anything new about your students since we last talked?

### **About the Author**

Dr. Elizabeth L. Jaeger is an assistant professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies, College of Education, University of Arizona. Her primary research interests involve supporting vulnerable readers as they make meaning of text and understanding the motivations of children and adults who choose to write for their personal fulfillment.